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ABSTRACT

Several theories postulate that factors such as socioeconomic status, environmental and genetic influences, and psychological traits account for juvenile delinquents' tendency to be poor readers. The academic needs of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections youthful offender population were explored to determine the need for reading programs in correctional institutions. Four types of data were collected: (1) achievement test scores in reading, math, and spelling; (2) students' attitudes toward reading; (3) instructors' perceptions of student needs; and (4) teachers' attitudes toward working in a correctional setting. Achievement and attitude instruments were administered to inmates (N=155) between the ages of 16 and 21 who expressed interest in participating in an educational program. Attitude and perception scales were administered to 12 teachers. Results indicate that the youthful offender population is academically deficient in reading, spelling, and math. Respondents appeared to be undecided about their feelings toward reading, but expressed more positive than negative attitudes. Comprehension was identified by all teachers as the major problem area for their students, followed by spelling and punctuation. Correctional teachers indicated no strong positive or negative attitudes toward working in a correctional environment. (NRB)

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE YOUTHFUL OFFENDER'S ACADEMIC NEEDS

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between juvenile delinquency and reading achievement has been widely researched. Several theories address factors such as socio-economic status, environmental and genetic influences, and psychological explanations in an effort to determine why juvenile delinquents tend to be poor readers.

Seitz (1977) maintains that "children from lower-class homes perform more poorly on measures of reading competence than do children from economically advantaged backgrounds" (p.1). Seitz notes that children from a lower socio-economic status generally perform below their abilities and are more sensitive to environmental influences. Their motivational factors vary, causing them to perform below their cognitive abilities. Other factors that cause low reading scores are differences in syntactic and semantic development, vocabulary differences and, at times; dialect-related problems.

Studies by Miller and Windhauser (1971) indicate that there is a correlation between reading disability and the tendency toward delinquency. The implication from this research is that prevention of reading disability could lower the incidence of delinquency. The research in this area delineated common traits of poor readers who turn toward delinquency, such as a poor adjustment to the school setting and the lack of positive personality characteristics. These students tend to be impulsive,

insecure, anxious, and lack emotional stability. Their self-concept is negative and they exhibit a low tolerance for frustration which in turn, triggers truancy and acts of delinquency. For a juvenile population with tendencies toward delinquency, the lack of success at reading can be offset by success at delinquent acts. Research by Roman (1957) suggest that the pattern of reading retardation, truancy, and delinquency could possibly be prevented by successful reading instruction.

Dorney (1967) postulates that an adolescent's attitude toward authority can be interpreted as a predictor of delinquency. Using this knowledge, it can be hypothesized that succesful reading instruction can produce a positive relationship with the reading instructor, which in turn can positively change the adolescent's self-concept of figures of authority.

In the area of educational programs for youthful offenders, Dell'Apa (1975) notes that youthful offenders in community schools and educational programs in correctional institutions have not received an effective education. This is due to a variety of reasons, particularly the failure to recognize delinquency as a function of society, failure to deal with the "whole" individual, cultural diversity and lifestyles, lack of adequately defined objectives for teachers, lack of framework, lack of community programs, and, in many instances, the possibility that teachers do not relate affectively to their students.

Correctional educators agree that specific knowledge and skills are necessary for the effective development and social interaction of juvenile delinquents. These include: basic skills,

reading, occupational and survival skills, intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. To acquire these skills, youthful offenders require more praise, encouragement, and understanding than the average student (Beck, 1977).

Dell'Apa (1973), in looking at educational programs in adult correctional institutions, explains that education has not generally been a major objective in prison systems. Punishment and security receive top priority, and, often, inmates are not encouraged to attend classes. Factors such as lack of motivation/interest, insufficient space, facilities, and funds, as well as the conflict between work assignments and time allotted for school often deter educationally disadvantaged students from entering a school program. When they do enroll, student performance often suffers for reasons such as fatigue (full-time work assignments, other commitments) and lack of encouragement from prison administrators. Consequently, the drop-out rate is high in prison school programs.

Kilty (1977), examined reading programs in penal institutions and found that there was an intense need for basic reading instruction. Kilty noted that whereas a high percentage of institutions do have reading programs offering instruction at the basic, developmental, and advanced levels, only 40-55% of eligible inmates are involved in these programs and that only two out of three inmates who need reading instruction are reached.

While this brief review of the literature has indicated that there might be a relationship between reading disability

and delinquency, and that there is probably a substantial need for reading programs in correctional institutions, there is a paucity of data from which to draw a definitive conclusion. Consequently, this small scale, exploratory study was undertaken to provide answers to questions about: 1) inmate attitudes toward re- ng, 2) academic achievement levels of inmates, 3) teachers' perceptions of inmate needs, and 4) teachers' attitudes toward working in a correctional environment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study described in the following pages was undertaken for the purpose of identifying the academic needs of the Massachusetts Department of Correction's youthful offender population. While the achievement data reported include the basic skills areas of reading, math, and spelling, the primary focus of the study was directed toward skills deficiencies (both cognitive and affective) in the area of reading. A secondary purpose of the study was to substantiate the premise that inability to read is a contributing factor to academic deficiency in mathe- ics, since reading skills are necessary for students to understand directions in mathematics.

Since a needs assessment, by definition, should include both perceived and quantifiable needs, a third dimension of the study focused on teachers' perceptions of students' needs. To gather the data for this aspect of the study, a perception scale of needs was developed by this researcher (see Methodology section.) Since the perception scale was administered to a relatively small population (N = 12) and, furthermore, since the validity and reliability of the instrument was not determined, the data reported must be interpreted with caution.

Finally, an attempt was made to assess teachers' attitudes toward working in a correctional setting. The attitude assessment was conducted under the premise that a teacher's attitude has an effect on student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Again, however, the data reported for teachers' attitudes must be interpreted with caution since no attempt to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the attitude instrument was made.

METHODOLOGY

Four types of data were collected for the assessment: 1) achievement test scores in reading, math, and spelling; 2) students' attitudes toward reading; 3) instructors' perceptions of students' needs; and 4) teachers' attitudes toward working in a correctional setting. The Wide Range Achievement Test[1] was administered to a population of 155 incarcerates between the ages of 16 and 21. The achievement and attitude instruments were administered only to those inmates who had indicated an interest in attending an educational program and does not, therefore, represent a random sample of the youthful offender population. However, since the sample consists of approximately 30% of the entire youthful offender population incarcerated in Massachusetts state facilities, the data are probably representative of the

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[1] Justak Associates, Inc. 1978

entire population. Students' attitudes toward reading, as well as teachers' perceptions of students' needs, were assessed with a series of instruments designed specifically for this study.

The attitude instrument administered to the students was comprised of 14 items to which students could respond on a continuum of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The attitude instrument administered to the teachers (N = 12) was comprised of 12 items which were felt to measure attitudes toward such factors as interaction with staff and students, attitudes toward the setting in general, and attitudes toward the resources and tools available for teaching a correctional population. The teachers' perception scale was comprised of 17 academic skills which they were asked to rank on a continuum of 1 - 4 (1 = students have a major need; 4 = do not know what the students' needs are). Again, a sample of 12 teachers employed by the Massachusetts Department of Correction participated in the ranking of students' academic needs.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The achievement and attitude data were analyzed with descriptive statistics (measures of central tendency, distribution variability, frequencies and percentages). For computational purposes, the raw scores of the Wide Range Achievement Tests were utilized and then translated into grade equivalencies and percentiles.

RESULTS

A total of 155 students and 12 instructors from 7 institutions were represented in the assessment. In some instances, the size of the student sample was less than 155 since participation was

voluntary and students sometimes elected not to complete one or more of the instruments. For example, of the 155 attitude instruments distributed only 61 completed instruments were returned. Apparently the study participants either did not understand that they were to complete the attitude instrument, as well as the achievement test, or they purposely elected not to participate in this section of the study.

STUDENT AGE

Students' ages ranged from a low of 16 to a high of 20. The average age for the sample of 155 was 19.17 with a standard deviation of .92. The majority of the sample (45.1%) was 20 years of age. The frequency (absolute and relative) of students in each category is illustrated in Table I.

TABLE I

Age of Sample by
Absolute and Relative Frequency N = 155

Age	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
16	1	.65
17	8	5.16
18	25	16.13
19	51	32.9
20	70	45.16
Total	155	100.0%

ACHIEVEMENT TEST DATA

As noted earlier, the Wide Range Achievement Test was used as a measure of achievement for the sample of 155 inmates. This test, which is comprised of the sub-tests of reading, math, and spelling, was selected for ease of scoring and the relatively short time required for administration (30 minutes). The test results are reported as raw scores, grade equivalencies, and percentile ranks. The standard deviations, means, and modes were computed by using the raw scores which were then translated into grade equivalencies and percentiles. The results of the test are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2

Mean, Median, Mode, and Standard Deviation for the Wide Range Achievement Test N = 155

Sub-Test	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Reading	46.31	47.00	60.00	17.74
Spelling	18.51	17.00	10.00	9.32
Math	18.44	16.00	14.00	6.60

TABLE 3

Means and Standard Deviations in Grade Equivalencies N = 155

Sub-Tests	Mean G.E.	Standard Deviation G.E.
Reading	7.1	2.7
Spelling	5.7	2.4
Math	5.0	1.4

DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, the mean score on the Reading sub-test for the sample of 155 youthful offenders was 46.31 (G.E. 7.1) with a standard deviation of 17.74 (G.E. 2.7). The data indicate that approximately 68% of the sample had grade equivalency scores for reading between 4.4 and 9.8 or, in terms of percentiles, approximately 84% of the sample scored below the 47th percentile.

The data analysis of the scores for the Spelling sub-test indicated a mean of 15.51 (G.E. 5.7) with a standard deviation of 9.32 (G.E. 2.4). The grade equivalencies for the Spelling sub-test ranged from a low of 1.8 (frequency of 2) to a high of 10.9 (frequency of 2). The data indicate that the population is less skilled in spelling than reading, although more homogeneous.

The mean Math score was 18.44 (G.E. 5.0) with a standard deviation of 6.60 (G.E. 1.4). When compared with the data for the sub-tests of reading and spelling, the math data indicate that the population is more deficient in math skills than in the basic skills of reading and spelling. This finding is not surprising since the primary emphasis in the public schools' basic skills programs is usually on reading and language arts.

SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENT TEST DATA

The data reported in this section indicate that the youthful offender population is academically deficient in the basic skills areas of reading, spelling, and math. Of the three skill areas assessed, performance was found to be lowest in Math (mean G.E. = 5.0), followed by Spelling (mean G.E. = 5.7) and Reading (mean

G.E. = 7.1). The data support several conclusions and recommendations which are presented in a later section.

ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

A second aspect of the study of the youthful offender population was directed toward the assessment of attitudes toward reading. To this end, a 12-item Likert-type attitude scale was constructed and administered to a sample of 61 youthful offenders. The results from the attitude instrument administered are illustrated in Table 4.

For the most part, responses to the attitude instrument indicated that the youthful offender population was somewhat undecided about their feelings toward reading. Inspection of the means for individual items of the instrument, however, indicate that several items elicited moderately strong responses. For example, Item 13 "I like reading true stories." had a mean of 4.02, which suggests that the youthful offender population has more interest in reading true stories than fiction. On the reverse end of the continuum, Item 14 "I like having someone read to me" received the lowest mean (2.62) of the 14 items comprising the instrument. The relatively low reading for this item indicates a strong aversion to the notion of being read to and, therefore, passive participation in the area of reading. Another noteworthy rating is Item 2 "Reading turns me off" which received an average response of 3.85. The relatively positive rating for this item suggests that the population's attitude toward reading, while not overwhelmingly positive, is more positive than negative.

Furthermore, the attitude data support several conclusions and recommendations which are presented in a later section.

TABLE 4

Attitude Toward Reading N = 61

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I don't mind reading aloud.	3.20	1.45
2. Reading turns me off.	3.85	1.20
3. Reading is important for getting a job.	3.79	1.29
4. Money spent on books is a waste.	3.77	1.25
5. I like reading books.	3.67	1.22
6. Reading is for learning, not enjoyment.	3.41	1.29
7. Reading helps me think about things in a new way.	3.70	1.13
8. I have to read some things over to get something out of it.	2.87	1.30
9. Reading helps me understand my problems.	2.90	1.14
10. I read only what I have to.	3.41	1.18
11. When I have free time I would rather read than watch TV.	2.89	1.37
12. When I read, I can't keep my mind on the subject.	3.44	1.31
13. I like reading true stories.	4.02	1.03
14. I like having someone read to me.	2.62	1.34
TOTAL	3.40	26.65

TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS' NEEDS

A third purpose of this study was to identify teachers' perceptions of students' needs. To this end, a questionnaire comprised of 15 specific reading skills (See Table 5) was developed and administered to those teachers currently involved with the education programs for the youthful offenders (N = 12). The frequency of responses to each item are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Needs by Frequency
N = 12

Item	Major Need	Some Need	No Need	Don't Know
Phonics	4	7	1	0
Sight-reading	6	5	0	1
Comprehension	12	0	0	0
Outlining	5	4	3	0
Summarizing	7	5	0	0
Penmanship	1	5	6	0
Skimming	4	6	2	0
Punctuation	8	4	0	0
Spelling	9	3	0	0
Syntax	4	8	0	0
Following Directions	6	6	0	0
Reading Aloud	1	9	2	0
Oral Communication	3	4	5	0
Listening	7	5	0	0

As can be seen in Table 5, comprehension was identified by all teachers as the major need for their students, followed by spelling and punctuation. Other noteworthy needs included following directions (6 of the teachers identified this as a major need, 5 indicated some need, and 1 indicated no need), and summarizing (7 teachers indicated major need and 5 indicated some need). In only two of the 14 items did a sizeable number of the teachers indicate no need: penmanship (1 teacher indicated major need, 5 indicated some need, and 6 indicated no need), and oral communication (3 teachers indicated major need, 4 indicated some need, and 5 indicated no need). The data suggest that, from the teachers' perspective, there is a major need to teach the youthful offender population to read for comprehension, improve their spelling and punctuation. Conversely, there is no apparent need for instruction in penmanship and oral communication.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKING IN CORRECTIONS

The final purpose of the study was to assess the instructional staff's attitudes toward working in a correctional environment. To this end, a Likert-type attitude scale comprised of 13 items was constructed and administered to the 12 instructors involved with educational programs for youthful offenders. The means and standard deviations for the sample of 12 teachers who participated in the study are illustrated in Table 6.

The mean of 3.22 for the total attitude instrument suggests that correctional teachers do not have strong attitudes toward working in a correctional environment. However, an analysis of the individual items comprising the attitude instrument indicate

TABLE 6

Teachers' Attitudes Toward Working in Corrections
N = 12

Item	Mean	S.D.
1. We get the students too late in their lives to effect any change.	3.83	.52
2. This work is too frustrating.	3.75	.20
3. I would like to continue this work for a few more years.	3.75	.38
4. Individualized instruction is difficult to implement in the correctional environment.	4.17	.70
5. Teachers receive the support they need from all areas of correction.	1.67	.79
6. Education should be an integral part of an inmate's incarceration.	4.58	2.02
7. There are too many outside happenings that interfere with our teaching.	1.39	1.33
8. I feel that I am successful in improving the reading, language arts, and math skills of my students.	4.33	.24
9. There are few methods to change our students' attitudes toward reading.	3.67	1.21
10. There are sufficient commercially-produced materials suited to our population.	2.33	1.15
11. There are few appropriate diagnostic tools for our population.	2.17	.51
12. Initial diagnosis should be a large part of a remedial program.	3.75	2.20
13. Small group work is more effective than one-to-one teaching.	2.58	1.18
TOTAL	3.22	11.68

strong feelings toward specific aspects of working a a correctional environment. On the positive end of the continuum, for example,

the statement that "Education should be an integral part of an inmate's incarceration" received the most positive rating (4.58). Strong negative ratings were identified for the following items:

5. Teachers receive the support they need from all areas of correction. (1.67)

7. There are too many outside happenings that interfere with our teaching. (1.39)

10. There are sufficient commercially-produced materials suited to our population. (2.33)

11. There are few appropriate diagnostic tools for our population. (2.17)

13. Small group work is more effective than one-to-one teaching. (2.58)

The negative ratings for these five items suggest several conclusions: 1) Teachers do not feel that correctional personnel are generally supportive of their efforts; 2) there is a paucity of commercially produced instructional materials and diagnostic tools; and 3) there is a preference for individualized rather than group-paced programs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted earlier, the primary purpose of this study was to assess the academic and affective needs of the youthful offender population in Massachusetts. To accomplish this goal several types of data were collected and analyzed: 1) achievement test scores, 2) youthful offenders' attitudes toward reading, 3) teachers' perceptions of students needs, and 4) teachers' attitudes toward working in a correctional environment. The data presented earlier support the following conclusions:

1. Of the three skills areas assessed by the Wide Range Achievement Test, the population was found to be significantly below grade level in all three areas (math, reading, and spelling) with the greatest deficiency in the general area of math.

2. An assessment of youthful offenders' attitudes toward reading indicated that the population displayed a somewhat neutral attitude toward reading. However, an analysis of the individual items of the attitude instrument indicated a strong preference for reading non-fiction rather than fiction and a general aversion to being read to by a teacher.

3. An assessment of teachers' perceptions of their students' needs indicated that instruction in the areas of comprehension, spelling, and punctuation should be primary goals of the education program. Secondary needs included following directions, sight reading, and summarizing.

4. Finally, an assessment of teachers' attitudes indicated that while the teachers' feelings toward working in a correctional environment were, in general, somewhat positive there was, however, some indication of negative feelings toward specific factors of the environment. For example, the assessment indicated that teachers do not feel that they get the necessary support from correctional personnel; that institutional activities/concerns (security, counseling, non-educational programs, etc.) detract from the educational programs; that the commercially produced materials (instructional and diagnostic) are not appropriate; and that the only appropriate mode of instruction for this population is one of individualization.

The conclusions supported by the data lead to several specific recommendations for educational programs in corrections:

1. To remediate the basic skills deficiencies identified in the youthful offender population, individualized programs of instruction that stress skills acquisition in the areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics should be implemented. The individualized mode of instruction is more suitable for an adult offender population since it allows each participant to progress at his/her own pace as well as creating an atmosphere which limits pressure and embarrassment.

2. Since the assessment of inmates' attitudes toward reading indicated that the youthful offender approaches the learning situation with a moderately positive attitude, methodologies which reinforce these positive feelings should be incorporated whenever possible. For example, verbal praise, selection of materials which are interesting to the student, and tangible rewards for success should be incorporated into the program whenever possible.

3. Based on the finding that most students questioned would not prefer someone reading to them and, therefore, desire a more active role in the learning process, it follows that the students should be encouraged to participate in planning their educational programs and take an active role in all educational activities. For example, students should be encouraged to choose the subject matter that appeals to them for reading materials. Or, students should determine which math skills (e.g. basic operations, fractions, percent) they would like to improve because of particular problems they have been having.

4. Since most teachers assessed their students to be deficient in comprehension, spelling, and punctuation, these areas should be stressed in educational programs. Other areas to receive attention should include following directions, sight-reading, and summarizing.

5. Due to the general feeling that there are not sufficient commercially-produced materials for teaching this population, teachers should be encouraged to construct their own materials and be provided in-service training to aid in this task.

6. Finally, program administrators in the central office and administrative personnel at the various correctional facilities should demonstrate more support and encouragement for on-site teaching personnel. Central office staff and institutional administrative staff should work more closely to incorporate educational programs more fully into treatment plans in order that education play a more significant role in the rehabilitative process.

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